



# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

## **THESIS**

**TALIBAN INFORMATION STRATEGY:  
HOW ARE THE TALIBAN DIRECTING THEIR  
INFORMATION STRATEGY TOWARDS THE  
POPULATION OF AFGHANISTAN?**

by

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December 2009

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<b>REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE</b>			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington DC 20503.				
<b>1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)</b>		<b>2. REPORT DATE</b> December 2009	<b>3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED</b> Master's Thesis	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> Taliban Information Strategy: How Are the Taliban Directing Their Information Strategy Towards the Population of Afghanistan?			<b>5. FUNDING NUMBERS</b>	
<b>6. AUTHOR</b> Derek I. Schmeck				
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000			<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>9. SPONSORING /MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> N/A			<b>10. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.				
<b>12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited			<b>12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE</b>	
<b>13. ABSTRACT</b>  <p>The purpose of this thesis is to understand the core components of the Afghan Taliban information strategy, which they treat as their main effort in their struggle to regain power. The Taliban use cultural metaphors from multiple sources such as Islam, pushtunwali, and Afghanistan's history to frame their right of religious and political authority. Taliban information strategy interweaves these metaphors with threats to sow fear in the minds of the Afghan population. Such methods employed by the Taliban to send their messages consist of leaving shabnamehs (night letters) to demonstrate that the Taliban can appear at anytime. More modern methods such as creating DVDs have recently been incorporated into their toolbox for the purpose of sustaining their fighter's moral and recruiting new followers inspired by their battle victories. This thesis determines that the Taliban are focusing their information strategy on short-term goals and thus, is relatively ineffective. This is derived from polling data that demonstrates the majority of Afghan people do not support the Taliban or desire to see their return to power. The Taliban are viewed as the reason for poor security despite their efforts to convince the population that the government cannot provide security. The Taliban information strategy has relied primarily on fear and coercion rather than persuasion. The Taliban's problematic IO strategy affords multiple opportunities for the United States and its allies to reach out to those parts of the Afghan population for whom the Taliban provide a disproportionate amount of all their information. This thesis makes specific recommendations on how best to achieve this goal.</p>				
<b>14. SUBJECT TERMS</b>  Information strategy, Taliban, Cultural Framing, Night Letters			<b>15. NUMBER OF PAGES</b> 77	
			<b>16. PRICE CODE</b>	
<b>17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT</b> Unclassified	<b>18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE</b> Unclassified	<b>19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT</b> Unclassified	<b>20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b> UU	

NSN 7540-01-280-5500

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 2-89)  
Prescribed by ANSI Std. Z39-18

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HOW ARE THE TALIBAN DIRECTING THEIR INFORMATION STRATEGY  
TOWARDS THE POPULATION OF AFGHANISTAN?**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE IN INFORMATION OPERATIONS**

from the

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this thesis is to understand the core components of the Afghan Taliban information strategy, which they treat as their main effort in their struggle to regain power. The Taliban use cultural metaphors from multiple sources such as Islam, pushtunwali, and Afghanistan's history to frame their right of religious and political authority. Taliban information strategy interweaves these metaphors with threats to sow fear in the minds of the Afghan population. Such methods employed by the Taliban to send their messages consist of leaving shabnamehs (night letters) to demonstrate that the Taliban can appear at anytime. More modern methods such as creating DVDs have recently been incorporated into their toolbox for the purpose of sustaining their fighter's moral and recruiting new followers inspired by their battle victories. This thesis determines that the Taliban are focusing their information strategy on short-term goals and thus, is relatively ineffective. This is derived from polling data that demonstrates the majority of Afghan people do not support the Taliban or desire to see their return to power. The Taliban are viewed as the reason for poor security despite their efforts to convince the population that the government cannot provide security. The Taliban information strategy has relied primarily on fear and coercion rather than persuasion. The Taliban's problematic IO strategy affords multiple opportunities for the United States and its allies to reach out to those parts of the Afghan population for whom the Taliban provide a disproportionate amount of all their information. This thesis makes specific recommendations on how best to achieve this goal.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

ANA	Afghanistan National Army
ANP	Afghanistan National Police
INS	Insurgents
IO	Information Operations
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
SC	Strategic Communication
SMT	Social Movement Theory

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I am grateful for the support of all those who have assisted me with the research, writing and formatting of this thesis. I am especially grateful to Professors Glenn Robinson and Heather Gregg for their time, expertise and guidance they provided me throughout this thesis.

To my family: Amy, Sienna and Sinjin who sacrificed time spent with me so that I could conduct my research and analysis required to complete this thesis. My deepest appreciation goes out to you for your patience, support and understanding. Thank you.

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# **I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

## **A. THESIS OVERVIEW**

Since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, the U.S. military and its coalition partners have defeated Taliban forces when openly confronted by them. While no one seems to suggest that the Taliban will defeat the U.S. militarily, there have been concerns in recent years about how they are defeating U.S. forces on the information battlefield. The Taliban have not capitulated or faded away, despite eight years of war. They retain a level of support that allows them to continue operations in Afghanistan. The Taliban also operate freely in the border regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The support the Taliban grows and maintains comes through its information strategy. U.S. forces cannot be everywhere in the region and, because of this, the population does not have direct knowledge of America's goals and activities. Coupled with the lack of information and transportation infrastructure, the people have very few outlets to gain accurate information. This is an advantage for the Taliban because they can fill the vacuum of information with their own views. As more U.S. forces build up in Afghanistan and the Pakistani military begins to confront Taliban forces in the border region, how will the Taliban maintain their support?

Addressing this issue will be difficult because the situation is constantly evolving and little literature is current on the subject. This thesis gathers information from open sources, information gleaned from recent articles, studies and reports. From this research, I will attempt to offer future trends the Taliban may follow and offer suggestions on how U.S. forces can defeat the Taliban information strategy.

## **B. BACKGROUND**

The United States (U.S.) toppled the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in a quick manner after the launching of Operation Enduring Freedom. Although the Taliban governed most of the country, this defeat was possible because they did not have the full

support of the population. Those opposed to the Taliban, including elements of the ancient regime, assisted U.S. forces in overthrowing Taliban rule. Eight years onward the United States is still fighting in Afghanistan and facing a resurgent Taliban presence. How could, after such a sweeping victory by the U.S., the Taliban still be a threat after all these years? The answers lies not in the military prowess or ability of the Taliban to remain a viable threat, but rather a combination of the Taliban executing an adequate information strategy and the United States executing a poor one.

The United State's poor information strategy is no secret, nor does it go unrecognized. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said during a speech at Kansas State University

Public relations was invented in the United States, yet we are miserable at communicating to the rest of the world what we are about as a society and a culture, about freedom and democracy, about our policies and our goals. It is just plain embarrassing that al-Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the Internet than America...Speed, agility, and cultural relevance are not terms that come readily to mind when discussing U.S. strategic communications.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of the quote is not to confuse the reader by assuming al-Qaeda and the Taliban are the same, but to show that there is an understanding at the highest levels of the government that America is not conducting an effective information strategy. While the Taliban and al-Qaeda are different entities, the Taliban has learned a few things from al-Qaeda about conducting an information campaign.

## **C. PURPOSE, SCOPE AND METHOD**

### **1. Purpose**

The Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan soon after the withdrawal of Soviet forces until they were removed from power during Operation Enduring Freedom. The Afghan population is aware of the way the Taliban ruled before they were toppled. As

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Gates, Landon Lecture (Kansas State University), <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1199> (accessed June 16, 2009).

the Taliban enjoyed a certain degree of sanctuary in Pakistan and regrouped, what have they done as a group to change the population's opinion about the Taliban?

The purpose of this study is to examine the Taliban Information Strategy, how have they directed their information campaign towards the population in Afghanistan and how are they currently directing their information campaign towards the population of Pakistan. This research is aimed at benefiting information strategists dealing with the Taliban in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region and how they may develop countermeasures for mitigating Taliban influence and support. This thesis will also be beneficial for operations planners to develop a better understanding of what types of actions planned could play into the hands of Taliban messaging themes that may lead to greater support for Taliban causes or at the least neutral attitudes towards U.S./Coalition forces.

This study shows that the Taliban have evolved since their formation from a movement that shunned modern technologies to one that has begun using technological assets to disseminate their message. This study does not try to determine whether the Taliban ideology has changed or evolved, but it does show that the Taliban have adopted the use of previous information tools that were previously rejected.

The Taliban are using similar themes in their efforts to return to power today as they used when they first rose to power in Afghanistan, such as the government is corrupt, the government should be based on Islamic law, and the government cannot provide security to the people. The difference in their recent efforts is that the people of Afghanistan know what life under Taliban rule was like and Taliban must now convince the people that they have learned from their past and now offer a better alternative.

Despite decreasing support for U.S. efforts and the Afghan government, the Taliban have not been able to capture any significant amount of support that would bring them back into power. The Taliban information strategy may be increasing the population's level of discontent, but it does not appear to be achieving an increase in the populations support for their efforts.

## **2. Scope**

The scope of this thesis considers the overall Taliban information strategy. This is not meant to examine specific themes in one area alone, but to determine what the overall theme of the Taliban information strategy is and where there are seams in that strategy that can be exploited.

I will look at whether their words match their deeds, if there is a coordinated strategy across different ethnic populations in Afghanistan, how they justify their actions culturally and religiously, and how if they have altered their view on certain issues prior to their being toppled and their current resurgence such as their views on the use of technology and education.

## **3. Method**

The methodology for effectively gauging the Taliban information strategy is slim. The best data to use is polling data. Fortunately, more polling data has been obtained over the past few years from a variety of sources. Unfortunately, this data is only a few years old and is difficult to establish a correlation between Taliban words and deeds with their effect over a long period of time.

Besides polling data there is a growing body of work written about the Taliban's activities that will provide insight into establishing their overall objectives and informational themes that may contribute to reaching their objectives. Through these bodies of work, I will determine if there is an existence of a long-term information strategy being employed by the Taliban to achieve its objectives or if they merely focus on short-term gains.

Determining casual effects between the Taliban's messages and the growing discontent with the Afghan government and U.S./Coalition forces will be paramount to establishing whether the Taliban have a long term or short term information strategy. If the Taliban concentrate their messages on highlighting the failures of the Afghan government or the death toll Coalition forces take on the civilian population, than the Taliban would seem to embrace a short-term strategy that can be overcome by changes in

governance and tactics. If, however, the Taliban have a longer term strategy at play they should be trying to influence Afghans that they have solutions to their problems and are finding ways to connect with the population to garner support.

#### **D. THESIS ORGANIZATION**

The thesis is organized into four chapters. The first chapter is the Introduction, which identifies the purpose of the thesis. Following the Introduction is the Background, which discusses who the Taliban are, how they came to power and how they ruled when they were in power. The first chapter ends with the explanation of the purpose, scope and method of the thesis.

Chapter II discusses the Taliban Information Strategy. When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, they banned the use of modern day technologies such as computers and cell phones. Their recent information activities have been conducted using the tools they once forbid. Video footage is recorded for the purpose of backing up their claims and for recruiting. This footage is distributed on DVDs, as well as posted on the Internet. The non-technological means of sowing fear in an area through the use of night letters, which are threatening notes posted or graffiti scrolled onto doors or walls, has evolved to text messaging key individuals to sow fear. The recent acceptance of these technologies has led to their messages appearing uncoordinated because of the leadership's uneven understanding of the reach these technologies can achieve.

Chapter III will look into the effects of the Taliban information strategy through the examination of polling data. The effects considered are whether the Taliban's messages are resonating with the population and resulting in garnering overt support for their aims. The data cited will show that over the last few years there has been a decrease in the Afghan population's positive view of the U.S. forces and of the central government and their abilities to provide security and increase their well-being. The polling data does not indicate a reciprocal increase in support for the Taliban efforts or for their return to power.

Finally, Chapter IV will offer the conclusion that the Taliban information strategy is concerned with the short term objective of demonstrating that they will always

be present in the area but U.S. forces are a temporary fixture. The Taliban must only demonstrate to the people that the U.S. forces are an occupying presence and that they will one day leave Afghanistan. This information strategy demonstrate that the Taliban do not appear to plan for a return to power by informing the population what their future rule will be able to provide to the people. The lack of solid support for their efforts by the people indicates that the people do not think the Taliban are the future rulers but they do not want to make them enemies that will exact revenge on those who opposed them. The U.S. needs to confront the Taliban information strategy directly by challenging all false claims by the Taliban and exposing any Taliban hypocrisy at every opportunity. . These recommendations should provide a point of departure for further discussions and ideas to counter the Taliban information strategy.

## **II. TALIBAN INFORMATION STRATEGY**

Both the Taliban and the United States started at a disadvantage for effectively conducting information strategies. The Taliban were known for their rejection of modern devices and un-Islamic practices such as television, music and the internet. This rejection put them at an immediate disadvantage in trying to spread their messages to mass audiences. On the other hand, the United States embraced modern devices but failed to understand why the Taliban were able to rise to power in the first place. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, lawlessness and rampant corruption abounded. When the Taliban took over an area they ruthlessly brought law and order, and stamped out the corruption of local officials. Eventually, there was an up swell in support of the Taliban. The support for the Taliban occurred for two reasons; a) the Taliban brought law and order and thus peace to the areas they controlled and b) there was a Pashtun ethnic identification associated with the Taliban in the southern and eastern regions. These factors did not, however, equate to a deep-seated sense of legitimacy, which is why, when the United States invaded, the people switched their allegiances quickly, hoping for an alternative system.

This chapter discusses the Taliban information strategy. The first part of this chapter covers how the Taliban frame the issues of their religious authority, how they justify Pashtun authority in non-majority Pashtun areas, how they justify opium production. The second part of the chapter will discuss the means they use to spread their messages and lastly if they coordinate their messages.

The Taliban information strategy focuses on the key themes of establishing Sharia law (Islamic law), government corruption and establishing peace. These themes are in areas that the Taliban say the current government in Afghanistan is failing. These themes are spread through messaging that utilizes various tools such as night letters, DVDs with video of recent Taliban “battle victories” and an established Web presence. The result of the expansion of available tools the Taliban are using to disseminate their messages, an unintended consequence has emerged. There is a lack of coordination between those

conveying the message and those elements conducting their activities. As a result, the Taliban at times appear to contradict themselves. Such a failure to synchronize their efforts should decrease their ability to build greater support for their return to power.

#### **A. UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL FRAMING IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY**

In understanding how the Taliban's information strategy works, it is helpful to explore social movement theory to better understand the Taliban. Social movement theory (SMT) seeks to explain how a social movement takes root in a society and rises within that society. Social movement theory is based on three variables within its context. The first variable seeks to analyze how changes in political opportunity structures impact the acceleration or deceleration of collective action. The second SMT variable focuses on mobilizing structures for the group in question. The third variable is "cultural framing."

Unlike the other two analytical approaches, SMT takes cultural issues seriously, but more in an ideological-tactical sense than is typically found in primordial understandings of culture. In SMT, culture is conceptualized as multi-tiered. Every society has a variety of stories, symbols, and histories that make up something of a collective cultural toolbox.<sup>2</sup>

After the Afghans, with support from the United States, defeated the Soviet Union, there was much enthusiasm for the future. The Mujahedeen were viewed as heroes and very popular. Soon after the Soviet withdrawal, key leaders of the mujahedeen began fighting for power in the aftermath. These leaders retained the militias they lead against the Soviets and used them to gain power. The militias were often manned from the tribes of their leaders. This resulted in civil war with tribes fighting against other tribes within Afghanistan. Soon the new government in Afghanistan became corrupt as the militia commanders or warlords were given positions within the government as methods to share power. The warlords would reward their

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<sup>2</sup> Glenn Robinson, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, date), 116.

tribes with positions based on tribal membership and not merit. The tribal fighting and corruption lead to disillusionment among the people and the high regard they had for the mujahedeen.

These circumstances lead to the factors that formed the basis of the Taliban's cultural framing of the situation, resulting in a social movement as described by McAdams and Tilly. "Mediating between opportunity, organization and action are the shared meanings that people bring to their situations. At a minimum, they need to feel both aggrieved about some aspect of their lives and optimistic that, by acting collectively, they can redress the problem. Lacking either one or both of these perceptions, it is unlikely that they will mobilize even when afforded the opportunity to do so."<sup>3</sup> The following explanation by a Taliban spokesman about why the Taliban were able to rise to power, demonstrates McAdams and Tilly's point that by taking advantage of the peoples feeling of aggravation about their situation created a sense of optimism that the Taliban would be able to right the wrongs they saw occurring in Afghanistan.

A Taliban spokesman, Mullah Wakil Ahmed, gave an interview in 1996 on why and how the Taliban formed.

After the Mujahidin parties came to power in 1992, the Afghan people thought that peace would prevail in the country. However, the leaders began to fight over power in Kabul. Some local leaders, particularly in Kandahar, formed armed gangs that fought each other. There was widespread corruption and theft, and there were roadblocks everywhere. Women were being attacked, raped, and killed. Therefore, after these incidents, a group of students from religious schools decided to rise against these leaders in order to alleviate the suffering of the residents of Kandahar Province. We were able to take control of several centers until we reached Kandahar and the former leaders fled from there.<sup>4</sup>

The Taliban gained acceptance and a following through their shrewd 'framing' of issues through a combination of Islamic, Afghan and Pushtun symbols. The Taliban have

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<sup>3</sup> Doug McAdam,; Sidney Tarrow,; and Charles Tilly, , "Towards An Integrated Perspective on Social Movements and Revolution," *Columbia International Affairs Online* (1996): 13, <http://www.ciaonet.org/wps/tic04/index.html> (accessed December 2, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Mardsen, *The Taliban: War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 60–61.

used the common religion of Islam in Afghanistan as a tie of commonality to bind the Pashtuns together to rise to power. The Taliban used a common theme within the Muslim world, which is “Islam is the solution,”<sup>5</sup> to recruit members. The Taliban portrayed themselves as the ones who are truly trying to establish an Afghan government based on Islamic law sharia, while the government that was established after the Soviets left consisted only of members trying to make a power grab and had no interest in establishing an Islamic state.

The education which the Taliban were receiving in the madaris [religious schools] from semi-educated maulvis [religious teachers], however, converted them into religious fanatics. They were made to believe that none of the then Afghan leaders was sincere about the establishment of what they perceived to be a truly Islamic state in Afghanistan. They were told that the struggle between Rabbani and Hikmetyar—two key leaders from the Soviet Afghan War—and the others was more about grabbing power than an effort to introduce Islamic practices in accordance with their own interpretations of Islam. The blame for the pitiable conditions in which the Afghans found themselves was placed at the doorsteps of the existing mujahedeen factions.<sup>6</sup>

The education the Taliban received was part of a cultural framing process that instilled in them a belief in their cause. “Movements and counter-movements not only are involved in mobilization contests to demonstrate who has the most support and resources at their command, they are involved in framing contests attempting to persuade authorities and by-standers of the rightness of their cause.”<sup>7</sup> An understanding of who the Taliban are influenced people to view the Taliban as a group that would not partake in the actions that were affecting the rest of the country i.e. corruption, political power struggles and a government not guided by Islamic teachings. The importance of this

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<sup>5</sup> Robinson, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, 116.

<sup>6</sup> Kamal Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994–1997* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 24–25.

<sup>7</sup> Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 269.

facet of SMT is that it leads the people to perceive the Taliban as a group that would bring much needed peace and order to a country tired of war.

The Taliban were able to condense their ideology down to a few simple messages; establish an Islamic state in Afghanistan based on Sharia law, end corruption and lawlessness, peace will be established where the Taliban rule. This would all be possible because Islam is the solution. This easy to understand ideology has enabled the Taliban, as a social movement, to effectively use cultural framing to gain power. This framing would fit Glenn Robinson's idea that "to effectively popularize its ideology, a social movement must be able to provide clear summations of its ideology that resonate with its target audience. Such cultural framings represent the popular, bumper-sticker version of the broader ideology of the movement."<sup>8</sup> The ideology of the Taliban resonated among the people because the people where the Taliban originated were of the same ethnic group, Pashtun, and they were sick of the corruption and fighting that had been occurring for over a decade at that point.

## **B. TALIBAN IDEOLOGY**

The Taliban ideology is discussed in the following sections. The first part discusses how the Taliban ruled by sharia law, and why they are the ones to rightfully enforce sharia law. Next, the Taliban talk about the corruption that currently exists in Afghanistan. Finally, the last part discusses the Taliban bringing peace to the areas its rules and how they see that peace being achieved through areas of different ethnicities, where opium is being grown and their thoughts on education.

### **1. Establish Sharia**

The Taliban's belief that Afghanistan should be governed by sharia is based on their origins. They were students in extremist madrasa's "being prepared for jihad against those who it felt, were not adhering to the moral code of Islam."<sup>9</sup> Thus, with the fighting and corruption they witnessed in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal, they

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<sup>8</sup> Robinson, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, 129.

<sup>9</sup> Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994–1997*, 22.

saw only one way for the people to be ruled. That way was through the establishment of an Islamic State ruled by their interpretation of sharia law.

As the Taliban started to rise under the leadership of Mullah Omar, they realized that in order to continue on their path they needed to be viewed with a sense of legitimacy. Since Afghanistan was a Muslim country, the Taliban needed to be seen as the group that would be able to establish Islamic rule. During the mid-1990s in Afghanistan, many groups wanted to find ways to negotiate peace among the different elements within Afghanistan. The Taliban however were not looking for peace because all they saw was corruption. In Kandahar, a gathering of over 1,000 religious leaders from the Pashtun areas took place in the spring of 1996. The mullahs discussed a way forward but agreement could not be reached. The Taliban used a bold move to establish themselves as a legitimate authority. Ahmad Rashid explains:

To patch over their differences, the core group of Kandaharis around Mullah Omar nominated him to become the “Amir-ul Momineen” or “Commander of the Faithful,” an Islamic title that made him the undisputed leader of the jihad and the Emir of Afghanistan. (The Taliban were later to rename the country the Emirate of Afghanistan). On 4 April 1996, Omar appeared on the roof of a building in the centre of the city, wrapped in the Cloak of the Prophet Mohammed, which had been taken out of its shrine for the first time in 60 years. As Omar wrapped and unwrapped the Cloak around his body and allowed it to flap in the wind, he was rapturously applauded by the assembled throng of mullahs in the courtyard below, as they shouted “Amir-ul Momineen.”

This oath of allegiance or “baiat” was a procedure similar to when Caliph Omar was confirmed as leader of the Muslim community in Arabia after the death of the Prophet Mohammed. It was a political masterstroke, for by cloaking himself with the Prophet’s mantle, Mullah Omar had assumed the right to lead not just all Afghans, but all Muslims.<sup>10</sup>

The Taliban professed they were enforcing sharia law, but in reality they were enforcing a social code called Pashtunwali. Pashtunwali gives “the tribal jirga or council the right to make judgments on cases from a traditional pantheon of laws and

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<sup>10</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 42.

punishments, especially when it came to disputes over ownership of land and women and murder. The line between Pashtunwali and Sharia law has always been blurred for the Pashtuns. Taliban punishments were in fact drawn largely from Pashtunwali rather than Sharia.”<sup>11</sup>

## **2. Corruption**

The withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan left a country decimated by a decade’s worth of war. The mujahedeen commanders who fought the war gained power during the war by creating their own militias. After the war, they held onto these private militias to help ensure they remained powerful. They used these militias to ensure they had positions of importance within the new government and then doled out jobs to those who remained loyal to them. This led to rampant corruption within the new government of Afghanistan.

The level of corruption was a major contributor of discontent among the population. This was a key issue that the Taliban were able to seize upon for justification on the need to follow sharia. The Taliban vowed to stamp out corruption when they first came to power. Corruption, for the Taliban went beyond government officials awarding jobs based on loyalty to different factions rather than merit, or business being conducted through bribery. For the Taliban, fighting corruption included fighting off the corrupt influences, which were explained as those activities that were un-Islamic or western influenced. Mullah Omar has stated in the past “that his main goal was to rid Afghanistan of ‘corrupt Western-oriented time-servers.’”<sup>12</sup> In Mullah Omar’s view western influences of corruption in Afghanistan need to be stopped. The Taliban have taken actions to stop this corruption in instance such as denying women the right to work. These views have their origins in past attempts by Afghan rulers to reform the country. Daoud Khan was the Afghan Prime Minister from 1953-1963 and President from 1973-1978. During his time in power he enacted reform policies that were meant to improve the rights of women, such as the right to work and the right to appear in public without a

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<sup>11</sup> Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 112.

<sup>12</sup> Marsden, *The Taliban: War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan*, 60.

veil. In 1978, Daoud was overthrown in a coup by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The PDPA enacted reforms that included seeing females received an education in order to stop the high levels of illiteracy in Afghanistan. These reforms were met with resistance by tribal leaders from the rural areas. Both the governments of Daoud and the PDPA had many western educated members and were looked upon with suspicion by rural inhabitants.

During their reign in power the Taliban were attempting to turn the clock back in Afghanistan to a time before western influenced government officials were wielding power. "Thus, in prohibiting women from working, the Taliban consider that they are freeing society of what they see as the corrupt influences that have crept in as a consequence of Daoud's reforms, the PDPA coup and the fourteen years of Soviet-backed governments, the period of rule by the Islamist parties and the presence of Western agencies."<sup>13</sup> Their view of corruption also extends to girls education. "There is concern that girls will be corrupted by anything other than a pure Islamic teaching, consistent with the Taliban interpretation of Islam, and a consequent wish to create an exclusive focus on what is seen as their important role of bringing up the next generation of pure Muslims."<sup>14</sup> Other activities that the Taliban consider un-Islamic and corrupting are well documented such as kite flying, listening to music and other activities that take away from worshipping God.

The Taliban were successful in reducing their ideas of corruption in the areas they controlled, however the Taliban were not opposed to engaging in corruption to seize power themselves. The Taliban used bribery as an effective means to quickly gain control of areas by buying the allegiance of government officials and military commanders.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Marsden, *The Taliban: War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan*, 98..

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>15</sup> Dennis O. Young, "Overcoming the Obstacles to Establishing a Democratic State in Afghanistan," *Strategic Studies Institute United States Army War College* (2007): 7, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB818.pdf> (accessed September 4, 2009).

The Taliban, despite being ousted from power, still make use of the corruption theme based on the personnel holding positions of power within the Karzai government. In an article in *The Australian* from 2003 an Afghan official close to the presidency in referring to the warlords is quoted as saying “The same criminals, thieves and racketeers whose chaos led the Taliban to emerge in the first place are back in control, and their inefficiency and corruption are giving birth to the rise of the Taliban again. They are the germs of decadence in our society.”<sup>16</sup> The patronage that the warlords bestow amongst those loyal to them leads to the perception that not only is the central government considered corrupt, so are members of provincial government as well as the Afghan National Police. This is supported in a research document that states that

Far reaching research by human rights organizations demonstrates that Afghans in general believe that warlords accused of war crimes have weakened the authority of the state by hijacking critical positions of power in various public institutions around the country. Therefore, the public finds it difficult to rely on the state to provide them with protection, improve their living conditions, and defend their rights to life, liberty, and justice.<sup>17</sup>

These views, shared among the population, make the Taliban’s accusations against the Afghan government a theme that can easily resonate and endear the Taliban to the people. The Taliban were perceived as having been successful in reducing corruption where they ruled.

### **3. Peace Where the Taliban Rule**

The Taliban ruthlessly brought peace to the areas they took control over. The peace they brought came with a price. This section will look at how the Taliban dealt with other ethnicities in Afghanistan during the period when warlords and tribes were

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<sup>16</sup> Anthony Lloyd and Zahid Hussain, “Criminal Warlords Open Door for Taliban Resurgence—Slaughter of Innocents,” *Australian*, August 22, 2003, <http://www.e-ariana.com/ariana/eariana.nsf/allDocs/6D2FB1DF8B4C056287256D8A00722D0F?OpenDocument> (accessed October 22, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> David Shams, *Democracy’s Dilemma: The challenges to State Legitimacy in Afghanistan* (Lulu.com, 2008), 19.

fighting one another. Another area addressed is how the Taliban effectively cut back opium production in the later period of their rule and how they now view opium production and keep the peace in areas where they operate.

*a. Ethnicity*

The Taliban originated in Pashtun regions of the south and east of Afghanistan bordering along Pakistan. The result is that the Taliban are predominantly Pashtun. They do however have members from other ethnicities. The Taliban realized that to try and control all of Afghanistan they must incorporate members of other ethnic groups. “During their negotiations with representatives of Ahmed Shah Masood and Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Taliban were represented by Uzbeks and Tajiks—just to prove the point that the Taliban did not comprise Pashtuns alone.”<sup>18</sup>

The Taliban may have included other ethnicities, but they did not entrust those groups with any sense of power. “In Kabul and Herat and later Mazar—none of which have a Pashtun majority—the Taliban’s representatives such as governor, mayor, police chiefs and other senior administrators are invariably Kandahari Pashtuns who either do not speak Dari, the lingua franca of these cities or speak it poorly. There is no prominent local citizen in any of these local Shuras.”<sup>19</sup> Through these actions, the Taliban demonstrated that their appointed representatives had a greater desire to impose the Taliban brand of Islam on the local populace instead of ruling according to the traditions of that region. The Taliban would impose harsh treatments on urban areas where the populations were mixed with the different ethnicities. The Taliban “viewed the northerners as impure Muslims who had to be forcibly re-Islamicized.”<sup>20</sup> The Taliban carrying out their form of sharia law based on Pashtunwali, was perceived by non-Pashtuns as their way of imposing their Pashtun laws on the entire country. This resulted

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<sup>18</sup> Matinuddin, *The Taliban Phenomenon: Afghanistan 1994–1997*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 98–99.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

in further ethnic divides between the groups.<sup>21</sup> Despite this divide among the ethnicities, the Taliban's harsh methods enabled them to keep the peace in non-Pashtun areas.

### ***b. Opium Production***

Opium production has been a lucrative cash crop for Afghanistan. When Mullah Omar and the Taliban came to power, however, he banned the cultivation of poppies. Mullah Omar's basis for this ban was based in religious teaching.

Since the Taliban's removal from power, their words have changed little but their actions have changed to one of support in order to generate income. The Taliban in the past have claimed that corrupt government officials have been responsible for the cultivation of poppies, a theme they continue with today. In a November 2006 interview conducted by the on-line Taliban magazine called *Al-Sumud*, Abdel Rahim, the commander of Helmand province at the time was asked:

[Correspondent] Westerners claim that the Taliban movement plays a role in the narcotics trade and that it uses the revenue from this trade to finance its military operations. What is your answer to these claims?

[Abdelrahim] The Taliban movement has honorable objectives and, for the sake of its religion, never stoops to lowly acts. It also uses honorable methods in pursuing its goals. The world bears witness that the Taliban government was the first ever authority to destroy the cultivation of narcotic drugs and the drug trade in the whole of Afghanistan. This was an achievement that astounded the world. International drug lords began to think of ways to help global intelligence services to topple the Taliban government to defend their financial interests that were linked to the drug trade. After the puppet government was established in Afghanistan, senior government figures were seen to be involved in the narcotics trade, chiefly Ahmad Wali Karzai, brother of the agent [now-president Hamid] Karzai, and his partner the famous smuggler Hajj Adam from Helmand's Nawa-i-Barakzayi district. When the puppet government's Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali examined the file of the drug merchants, he found that senior government figures were among them. He reported their names to the United Nations and the U.S. Government but he could not do anything to them because they are under strong U.S. protection and the Americans

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<sup>21</sup> Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, 112.

need them to run this government. The interior minister was forced to resign his post. Their accusation that we are involved in the drug trade is similar to their other false accusations.<sup>22</sup>

The Taliban use these government corruption themes to highlight the failure of the U.S.-backed Karzai regime, and talk of how they were the ones who ended this un-Islamic activity. The majority of poppies are grown in the Pashtun regions of southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban maintain a strong presence. “In 2006, the southern province of Helmand accounted for 46% of Afghanistan’s opium production. To the east of Helmand, Kandahar produced eight percent. In other words, the majority of Afghanistan’s opium economy is built on production in two southern provinces.”<sup>23</sup> Because poppies bring in so much money the Taliban turns a blind eye to the farmers cultivating the crops, in return the Taliban maintain peace in their regions because the farmers have jobs, and the Taliban can demand a payment for providing the security for government efforts to stop them from growing poppy.

The amount of dependence the Taliban rely on poppies is explained in a 2007 report by The Jamestown Foundation.

Law enforcement officers and UNODC officials interviewed by the authors in April 2007 believe that the “Taliban are completely dependent on the narco-economy for their financing.” Where the Taliban are able to enforce it—mostly in the south and some eastern districts—they are said to levy a 40% tax on opium cultivation and trafficking. A low estimate of the amount that the Taliban earn from the opium economy is \$10 million, but considering the tradition of imposing tithes on cultivation and activities further up the value chain, the total is likely to be at least \$20 million.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Anon, “Taliban Online Magazine Al-Sumud Interview Jihadist Leader in Helmand Province,” *Open Source Center*, [https://www.opensource.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS\\_0\\_0\\_246\\_203\\_121123\\_43/content/Display/7839736?highlightQuery=eJzTUKp2zInRDS7NLU2pVVII9wzx8PRTCPEM8XHVBAB%2BEQhn&fileSize=168360](https://www.opensource.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_0_246_203_121123_43/content/Display/7839736?highlightQuery=eJzTUKp2zInRDS7NLU2pVVII9wzx8PRTCPEM8XHVBAB%2BEQhn&fileSize=168360) (accessed October 2, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Hayder Mili, “Afghanistan’s Drug Trade and How it Funds Taliban Operations” *Terrorism Monitor* 5, no. 9 (2007), [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=4145&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=182&no\\_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4145&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=182&no_cache=1) (accessed September 26, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Mili, “Afghanistan’s Drug Trade and How it Funds Taliban Operations.”

Despite these figures, the Taliban continue to deny their involvement in poppy production. In a 2007 interview in Al-Sumud, the Taliban Deputy Leader, Mullah Bradar, stated:

[Correspondent] You have referred to the issue of capabilities and the agent administration of Karzai, while some international observers claim that the only way to fund the mujahidin of the Islamic Emirate is through drug cultivation and dealing, and that the mujahidin depends on drugs to confront the Crusader forces. In addition, the administration claims that the areas under your control have the greatest amount cannabis under cultivation.

[Bradar] First, let me say that the Mujahidin of the Islamic Emirate are legal mujahidin. They are not mercenaries or fighters without creed. Their resistance against the aggressor occupiers is a religious resistance based on the rulings of the Koran and the Sunnah. Undoubtedly, the sound creed and the sacred jihad are the greatest aims that need legal [funding] means. The cultivation of drugs and earning money through it is prohibited, and it cannot be used as a justification for achieving a legal aim. Therefore, I can assure you that financing the legal jihad operations through illegal means is considered high treason to the religious jihad. The mujahidin is ordained to follow legal means for its jihad in accordance with the Koranic and prophetic texts that call for this matter and forbid prohibited means.

Second, during its rule, the Islamic Emirate issued a resolution unprecedented in Afghanistan's history when it forbade drug trafficking and cultivation. The Crusaders and their allies are aware of this.

If the agent administration of Karzai criticizes and condemns the mujahidin of the Islamic Emirate on these false charges, why does it not question itself? Why does it not ask about the position of Karzai's brother, Wali Karzai? All the people know that he is a drug dealer inside Karzai's office in Kabul.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Anon, "Taliban Deputy Leader Gives Interview Explaining Insurgency's 'Success' Reasons," *Open Source Center*, [https://www.opensource.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS\\_0\\_0\\_246\\_203\\_121123\\_43/content/Display/8221979?highlightQuery=eJzTUKr2ysxITMksLIEIT00qzixJLa5VUgj3DPHw9FMI9g8NcnbVVHD0c1HQUKoOSczJTErMQ8iHeIb4uGoCAPOiFPg%3D&fileSize=1322856](https://www.opensource.gov/portal/server.pt/gateway/PTARGS_0_0_246_203_121123_43/content/Display/8221979?highlightQuery=eJzTUKr2ysxITMksLIEIT00qzixJLa5VUgj3DPHw9FMI9g8NcnbVVHD0c1HQUKoOSczJTErMQ8iHeIb4uGoCAPOiFPg%3D&fileSize=1322856) (accessed October 2, 2009).

The Taliban's willingness to overlook the "high treason" of the poppy farmers has led to a current peace between the Taliban and farmers, but this is unlikely to last if the Karzai government and Coalition forces establish a greater presence in the poppy growing regions where the Taliban are active.

## **C. SPREADING THE WORD**

### **1. Night Letters**

Afghanistan is a country lacking the infrastructure that is common in a modern nation. Few good roads exist for cross-country transportation routes. This limits the possibility of accurate news being reported throughout Afghanistan. Coupled with the lack of transportation routes is a lack of communications infrastructure that would allow access to information systems in order to receive accurate information. This situation is an advantage for the Taliban to disseminate its messages. With so few outlets to access accurate information, Afghans gather their information through word of mouth. This benefits the Taliban because the people have no timely way to check the accuracy of what it is they are hearing. The other advantage for the Taliban is that they easily penetrate this system of information flow with their own uncontested versions of their message.

One of the most effective ways the Taliban are able to disseminate their uncontested message is through the use of what are called "night letters." "Night letters are leaflets or letters posted to doors or walls to inform, threaten or advise. They are an effective means of communication in areas where access to other media is limited. The contents of the night letters are usually warnings or instructions to the local population—to refrain from engagement with foreigners or to avoid sending children to schools, for example."<sup>26</sup> A night letter directed towards the people in Khost from May 2008 demonstrates the type of rhetoric the Taliban use in their messaging.

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<sup>26</sup> Tim Foxley, "The Taliban's Propaganda Activities: How Well is the Afghan Insurgency Communicating and What is it Saying?," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (2007), [http://www.sipri.org/contents/conflict/foxley\\_paper.pdf](http://www.sipri.org/contents/conflict/foxley_paper.pdf) (accessed May 30, 2009).

In the name of the “Afghanistan Islamic Emirate Khost Jihadi Military Front” warned “all residents in Khost” that:

1. Tribal elders should not consider the U.S. stronger than God and not give verdicts against mujahidin; otherwise you will soon regret it.
2. Those who spy and work for the infidel government and military forces should quit their jobs by 20 June; otherwise they will see something which they have never seen in their lives.
3. Do not get close to the infidel forces at any time or in any place.
4. During attacks on government and infidel forces, you should keep yourselves safe and not provide support for them; if this rule is violated, your death will be the same as the death of the U.S. and their puppets.
5. Our mines are live; we do not allow the killing of civilians, but you should not show them to the infidels and their slaves. We will show our power to those who show our land mines to them or inform them about us.
6. When you see infidel forces on the street and roads, stop where you are and do not go forward.
7. Those mullahs who perform funerals for those who are killed in the campaign—national army, national and border police and intelligence—will be killed with torture; and remember: such a mullah will never be forgiven.<sup>27</sup>

The use of night letters is particularly effective because the Taliban can move in and out of villages and towns unnoticed compared to how U.S. forces move in and out of towns. Whereas the U.S. forces want to be seen and purposely convey information, the Taliban may not want to be seen in order to propagate fear into the local population by demonstrating through night letters they can be around at anytime.

There are instances where the night letters effectiveness is apparent, as a Time magazine article would indicate. “Night letters left across southern Afghanistan, the

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<sup>27</sup> Anon, “Asia Report: Taliban Propaganda—Winning the War of Words?” International Crisis Group (2008), [http://www.cfr.org/publication/19330/winning\\_the\\_information\\_war\\_in\\_afghanistan\\_and\\_pakistan.html?breadcrumb=%2F](http://www.cfr.org/publication/19330/winning_the_information_war_in_afghanistan_and_pakistan.html?breadcrumb=%2F) (accessed on May 17, 2009).

Taliban's stronghold, have slowed government services and brought reconstruction projects to a halt. In Kandahar province, many police officers have quit, and after letters appeared threatening employees, two medical clinics were shut down. In the past two months, insurgents have burned down 11 schools in the region. Some of the attacks were presaged by night letters warning parents to keep their children home.”<sup>28</sup> Instances like this demonstrate the ability of the Taliban to spread fear. The night letters themselves are not the most influential part of a Taliban information strategy; it is their ability to carry out what it is they threaten to carry out. American and Afghan forces cannot be everywhere at once. Since U.S. and Afghan forces wear uniforms and are visible, it is easy to tell when they are present. Their presence reassures the populace of their safety. The Taliban however, can move wherever there are no government forces present and spread their fear.

The Taliban effectively communicate to the people that they will be the ones who will remain when the U.S. forces withdraw. One night letter that showcases this is presented in an article by Thomas Johnson, which when translated offered a warning to the people of Khandahar “that the Taliban will kill all those who cooperate with the Americans once the Americans leave. The point is emphasized by asserting that ‘the Americans will not always be there’ to protect those who chose to cooperate. Moreover, the letter states that the Taliban ‘knows’ the names and location of collaborators and compares these present-day collaborators with those who were ‘loyal’ to the Russians during the anti-Soviet jihad.”<sup>29</sup> This is a difficult strategy to counter. This strategy is suited to the Taliban because they do not travel in units or as parts of a convoy or with force protection measures in place. To sow fear only requires one member of the Taliban to show up in the night to post a letter on a village wall.

Attempts to destroy Taliban members in areas does not equate to destroying Taliban influence in an area. The Taliban can easily rely on their message that the

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<sup>28</sup> Aryn Baker, “Deadly Notes in the Night,” *Time*, July 5, 2006: 1, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1209945,00.html> (accessed June 15, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, “The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of Shabnamah (Night Letters),” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 18, no. 3 (2007): 327, [http://www.nps.edu/Programs/CCs/Docs/Pubs/Small\\_Wars\\_%20Pub.pdf](http://www.nps.edu/Programs/CCs/Docs/Pubs/Small_Wars_%20Pub.pdf) (accessed June 14, 2009).

Afghan government cannot protect you and collaborating with U.S. forces will lead to death, when they can operate in such a fluid fashion. Such an example of how easy the Taliban can carry out this strategy was evident when in May 2006 a U.S. airstrike “killed 24 suspected Taliban along with 16 civilians, wails of mourning were mixed with sighs of relief that the Taliban might finally have been defeated. But then the night letters resumed, warning villagers not to become puppets of the American “infidels.” Two weeks later, the Taliban seized two local police officers accused of collaborating with the government. Within two hours, they were publicly tried, sentenced and beheaded.”<sup>30</sup>

The Taliban will be able to continue its use of night letters in its information strategy so long as they are free to move and operate where there are no U.S. forces present or Afghan government forces present. While efforts should continue to eradicate Taliban members, it must not be looked upon as the way to undermine the Taliban’s ability to influence the population. Night letters do far more to sow fear among the Afghans than airstrikes do to make them feel secure.

## **2. Technology**

The Taliban have a monopoly on access to the population and the ability to communicate to them effectively through their use of night letters, but that is not the only methods the Taliban employ to reach their audience. Other means to convey their messages are DVD distribution, cell phone messaging, radio messages and websites. All of these techniques have found their way into the Taliban arsenal.

Night letters are a rather unsophisticated method of delivering the Taliban messages. The Taliban have their own publication to attract a greater audience than just the village they are trying to influence through their night letters. The first publication was Azam and it was published in Pashtu and Dari, the main languages spoken in southern and eastern areas of Afghanistan, where the Taliban enjoy the most support. That publication is no longer in existence due to the arrest of its publisher. This information is according to another publication that is still publishing called al-Somood

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<sup>30</sup>Baker, “Deadly Notes in the Night,” 3.

(al-Sumud). Al-Somood is an Arabic language magazine published by the Taliban monthly.<sup>31</sup> The fact that al-Somood is published in Arabic is a clear indication that the Taliban are trying to reach a broader audience. It is noted that this is probably the editor's second language as the Arabic is fairly rudimentary. There are other publications, however they only seem to be supportive of the Taliban and not actually published by them.

The use of DVDs to spread propaganda by the Taliban is a new phenomenon that they most likely learned by observing al-Qaeda. The Taliban distribute DVDs containing video footage of attacks against coalition troops and Afghan forces. Another reason the Taliban have for distributing DVDs is to visually refute claims made against them. The purpose is to discredit government proclamations and continue to show the population that the government cannot protect them. An example of this type of use of DVDs is when in 2008 a DVD was distributed that had an interview with Jalaluddin Haqqani, who was reported as dead, and two of Haqqani's commanders each mocking the reports of their death.<sup>32</sup> The video footage of these rebukes gives the Taliban a simple means to give credence to their messages that the government is ineffective at dealing with the Taliban. DVDs are mostly distributed in the larger cities due to the fact that these are the areas where the most computers and DVD players are available for viewing them.

The DVDs are often distributed across the border in Pakistan for recruiting purposes. The Taliban recruit from areas inside Pakistan such as Baluchistan and Karachi. Here, the Taliban ensure the DVDs are available in specific madrassas from which they recruit. Mullah Omar embraced this technology as a way to highlight Taliban heroes and their efforts to draw recruits from Pakistan. Mullah Dadullah was dispatched by Mullah Omar for such a recruiting mission. Dadullah was a well-known fighter who had fought against the Soviets and suffered many wounds during his fighting. "Dadullah's very savagery, filmed and now often circulated on videotape, coupled with his promotional flair, were just the ingredients Omar needed to put the Taliban back on

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<sup>31</sup> Anon, "Asia Report: Taliban Propaganda—Winning the War of Words?" 13.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 14.

the map.”<sup>33</sup> Dadullah was ultimately killed in 2007. Efforts such as this, demonstrate the Taliban’s and Mullah Omar’s understanding of how such technology can be effectively employed to solicit support.

The internet is another technology that the Taliban now embrace. While their use is not as sophisticated as al-Qaeda’s use of the internet, they are making strides. The Taliban have a website called Al Emarah (The Emirate), but its design is very simple. The simplicity may be done for expedience rather than lack of knowledge. This is because there are efforts to keep the website from operating however when there are successful attempts to shut the site down, it reappears later hosted on a new server. The website is available in five languages and mostly contains video of attacks, articles, and commentary for reporting events. Unlike other jihadist groups, its website does not have messages beyond jihad. This could indicate the Taliban’s more local focus, as opposed to al-Qaeda’s global focus. Another reason that the website may be so simple is because there are so few computers with internet access in Afghanistan that it is not an effective means to reach a large Afghan audience.

Other methods that the Taliban have employed in their efforts to spread their message have been radio broadcasts and cell phone messaging (SMS or “texting”). The Taliban have had little success with radio broadcasting due to their lack of being able to maintain a fixed broadcasting station inside Afghanistan coupled with the ability of coalition forces to jam the frequencies that they would transmit. “American military and intelligence personnel are working to jam the unlicensed radio stations in Pakistan’s lawless regions on the Afghanistan border that Taliban fighters use to broadcast threats and decrees.”<sup>34</sup> Cell phone messages are becoming more ubiquitous as cell phone ownership is reported to be at 52% of the total Afghan population. This method seems to be the 21st century equivalent of a night letter for the Taliban.

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<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Rubin, “In the Land of the Taliban,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 22, 2006: 7, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/22/magazine/22afghanistan.html?pagewanted=7&r=2&sq=Taliban%20are%20killing%20clerics%20who%20dispute%20holly%20war%20call&st=cse&scp=3> (accessed October 22, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Yochi J. Dreazen and Siobhan Gorman, “Pentagon Jams Web, Radio Links of Taliban,” *Wall Street Journal Online*, April 18, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124001042575330715.html> (accessed July 10, 2009).

The Taliban have embraced technologies they once viewed as un-Islamic. This change of heart may have to do with the position the Taliban are now in, that is out of power trying and needing to gather support to confront U.S. forces. Some insight may be shed onto the why the Taliban now embrace such technologies in an interview conducted by a *New York Times* reporter with an Afghan man referred to as A. “Mullah Dadullah is now a folk hero for young Talibs like A. And all the Taliban I met told me that every time Dadullah gives another interview or appears on the battlefield, it serves as an instant injection of inspiration.”<sup>35</sup>

The acceptance of new technologies may have more to do with sustaining internal moral and increasing recruitment than a change in religious philosophy. As Dadullah’s use of technology has shown, the Taliban are willing to change their acceptance of new ideas if they appear to assist the Taliban in achieving their aims. Beside the need to sustain moral, the Taliban most likely realized they need to adapt their use of information tools to compete against the Afghan government and U.S. forces. When the Taliban rose to power, Afghanistan was devastated by the war against the Soviet Union. The current technologies did not exist yet and as such the Taliban saw no need to embrace them in order to exert influence. Since their overthrow, Afghanistan has seen an influx of new technologies as a result of reconstruction efforts. Whether the Taliban agree with these tools use or not has not been determined. They realize that in order to convey a message, they must expand into the areas where their audience is present.

By Dadullah’s example, it was shown that new technologies could be effective in reaching new recruits. The Taliban understand that whether they agree with the technologies or not they must accept their use to more effectively reach the people. If the Taliban were to ever return to power they may again one day ban the use of such technologies but as long as they are out of power they seem to be willing to embrace their use.

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<sup>35</sup> Rubin, “In the Land of the Taliban,” 7.

#### **D. COORDINATED MESSAGING**

The Taliban have been embracing technology to spread their messages for various reasons. The result has been that many more Taliban are voicing their opinions and as such this is leading to a disconnection in what they are saying. According to Jacob, in his book *The Rise, Fall and Resurgence of the Taliban*, despite the fact that in June 2003, Taliban leader Mullah Omar had set up a Leadership Council to coordinate attacks in Afghanistan; the rapidly re-emerging Taliban do not seem to be a single, monolithic force. There is friction between 'moderates' and extremists, and between those who want to join the government and those who are opposed to such an idea. The two main factors causing the schism are the difference in the degree of religious extremism and the influence of Pakistan on the movement.

This schism is leading to the disconnection of the Taliban's messages. The Taliban have also suffered from a "deeds not matching the words" syndrome. As discussed earlier the Taliban have claimed that they do not condone opium harvest and production yet there is ample evidence to suggest otherwise. The Taliban now provide security to poppy farmers in order to collect money to support their efforts against the U.S. forces and Afghan government forces. Despite this, they still claim that they have nothing to do with poppy cultivation.

In the spring of 2009, the Taliban established and distributed a Code of Conduct for its members to follow. This code covers rules such as not torturing prisoners, avoiding civilian casualties and inviting and welcoming into the Taliban those Afghans who have worked for the Afghan government under President Karzai. These rules are a way to address through words how the Taliban should act, yet these rules were developed to demonstrate that the Taliban do not condone the actions that their followers have conducted.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

The Taliban are framing issues that resonate with the people. These issues were successful in bringing the Taliban to power once before and they seem to believe using these themes will bring them back into power. There is a flaw in the Taliban's use of these themes in their current attempts to control Afghanistan. The first time they came into power using the themes of establishing sharia, ending corruption, and establishing peace, the Taliban were an unknown element. People wanted to believe that they could bring about what they said they could. The Taliban were able to bring about what it said it would do, however, once the people experienced Taliban rule they were not happy with the tradeoffs life under Taliban rule required. As the Taliban now try to regain power using the same themes, the people are aware of what sacrifices would be made to live under their rule. The Taliban were able to convince people to support their rise the first time because they were tired of war and corruption and were ready for peace. This time the people are more fearful of what would happen if the Taliban were to return to power.

The methods by which the Taliban disseminate their messages have evolved not only from the first time they took control but also over the past eight years of war. They continue to have a firm control in disseminating night letters and the lack of physical U.S. or Afghan government security forces in all areas allows the Taliban to move freely and appear to be in all places at once. New tools to disseminate messages allow the Taliban to effectively reach greater audiences and also give the impression that they are successful. This acceptance of technological tools to effectively reach new and wider audiences has also led to the Taliban appearing un-coordinated. As more Taliban members appear in videos and give interviews, the more likely that what one sees is individual opinions, idea and perceptions and those opinions, ideas or perceptions do not always align with the message that Mullah Omar or other high level Taliban leadership are pronouncing.

Overall, the Taliban understand the usefulness of cultural framing to connect with the Afghan people. They have accepted new tools to reach their audience. What the Taliban currently lacks appears to be a coordinated effort to update their themes nested to

an overarching policy that would explain why the Afghan people should support their efforts to return to power. The absence of a plan demonstrating how the Taliban would govern in a manner that improved the lives of the people, only leaves the people with the perception of how life was under the Taliban previously. The Taliban must convince the population to stop trusting and to stop supporting the current government and security forces as well as obtaining overt support from the people in order to achieve their goals. The Taliban reliance on stroking fear is only useful in spreading a sense of discontent but not in obtaining the support necessary to return to power.

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### **III. EFFECTS OF THE TALIBAN INFORMATION STRATEGY**

#### **A. WHAT IS THE INFORMATION REACH OF THE TALIBAN?**

The Taliban have the market cornered on influencing the population of a specific town or village through their night letters. The Taliban's other methods of influence, such as DVD videos and an on-line magazine, do not seem to offer much in the way of reaching a broad audience however. Polling data from a 2009 report details the penetration of the various sources through which the Afghan people receive their news and information. This is covered below.

Overall, the past few years in Afghanistan have seen an increase in ownership of televisions, cell phones, and computers. The ownership of radios has remained steady. These are the main technological sources of information through which the population of Afghanistan receives their information. The rise in ownership of these devices has led the Taliban to increase its use of these means of communication, as was discussed in the last chapter. The benefit of using cell phones and computers for the Taliban is that they are harder for U.S. forces and the Afghan government to completely deny the Taliban. The Taliban's most widely used and effective message delivery tool, the night letter, provides them an outlet that comprises how 26% of Afghans receive their news, which is through friends, family, community leaders or religious leaders. Despite the Taliban's acceptance of new technological tools and older methods such as night letters, they have been unable to garner any additional support from the population for their return to power.

To understand if the Taliban are using the best methods to disseminate their messages we first need to look at what means of receiving information the population of Afghanistan possesses. Table 1 is a depiction of household possession of radio, TV, mobile phone and computer for Afghanistan as a whole and broken down between rural and urban areas.

*Table 9.1: Proportion of respondents who have the following communications technologies in functioning order in their households (Q-1) .ALL, RURAL AND URBAN SETTLEMENT (Q-1, Base 6406)*

	All (%)	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
Radio	81	81	77
TV set	41	30	80
Mobile phone	52	44	81
Computer	6	3	18

Table 1. Household ownership of technologies (From Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People)<sup>36</sup>

Table 1 shows that the radio is the most prominent technology source owned by the overall population. A radio is owned by 81% of the total population in both rural and urban areas. This is followed, second, by the mobile phone with 29% less ownership than the radio. The most widely owned conduit for messaging, the radio, is practically untouched by the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban are however increasing their reach by actively using messaging capabilities provided by the ever-increasing proliferation of cell phones. Table 2 looks at how the ownership of the technologies depicted in Table 1 have changed over the last three years starting in 2007.

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<sup>36</sup> Ruth Rennie, Sudhindra Sharma, and Sen Pawan, "Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People," *The Asia Foundation* (2009): 142, <http://www.asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/Afghanistanin2009.pdf> (accessed October 30, 2009).

*Table 9.3: Proportion of respondents who have the following communications technologies in functioning order in their households (Q-1) COMPARISON BETWEEN 2007, 2008 AND 2009*

	2007 (%)	2008 (%)	2009 (%)
Radio	88	84	81
TV set	37	38	41
Mobile phone	42	40	52
Computer	-	5	6

Table 2. Household technologies in functioning order  
(From Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People)<sup>37</sup>

As Table 2 shows, since 2007 radio ownership has declined 7%, while mobile phone ownership has risen by 10%. The increase in mobile phone ownership is important to watch because it provides an outlet for information dissemination the Taliban are utilizing to effectively compete with U.S. forces and the Afghan government in reaching the population.

Radio and TV are the leading sources of how the Afghan population receives information about what is occurring in their country. The reliance on either radio or TV is different between rural or urban areas though and do not constitute the only sources of information consumption as Table 3 depicts; mobile phones and computers are also gaining prominence.

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<sup>37</sup> Rennie et al., “Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People,” 143.

*Table 9.4: Which is the main source from where you normally get information about what is happening in the country? (Q-6, Base 6406) COMPARISON BETWEEN 2006, 2007, 2008 AND 2009*

	2006 (%)	2007 (%)	2008 (%)	2009 (%)
Radio	55	54	51	47
TV	22	26	21	25
Friends, family and neighbors	15	14	18	18
Village chief/community leaders	5	3	5	6
Religious leader	2	1	2	2

Table 3. Main source of information  
(From Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People)<sup>38</sup>

“Radio remains the main source of information for the majority of rural residents (53%), while most urban residents identify TV (62%) as their most important information source. Recourse to friends, family, and neighbors as the principle source of information on national and local events is more than twice as high in rural areas (20%) as in urban areas (9%).”<sup>39</sup> The reason for such a high percentage of people receiving their information from radio and TV is because Afghanistan has such low literacy rates, especially among women. The Taliban must find other means to distribute their messages, because the Afghan government has great influence over radio, the medium which the majority of people use to receive their news. Their usage of DVDs and audio tapes is an indicator of their ability to adapt to the information environment. The Taliban’s disadvantage is that very few people have access to a DVD player, which is usually included with a computer and owned by only 6% of the population, as depicted in Table 2. It is possible that the Taliban hope that those who do watch their DVDs will spread the information from DVDs to their friends, which 18% of the population use to receive information. The Taliban seem to be making the most of their information

<sup>38</sup> Rennie et al., “Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People,” 142.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 142.

strategy by utilizing the outlets that remain to them. Those outlets are the combined 26% of information sources between friends/family/neighbors and community leaders/ village chiefs per Table 3.

## B. ARE THE TALIBAN’S MESSAGES RESONATING WITH THE POPULATION?

The Taliban information strategy focuses on establishing sharia law, the lack of security in the country, and government corruption. Polling data gathered by the Asia Foundation in 2009 queried the Afghan population about the direction they thought the country was headed. The data revealed that two of the Taliban’s themes, security and corruption, played an important role in their thoughts. The establishment of sharia is not mentioned but could be a factor in their view of the government. Table 4 presents the overall perception the Afghans have about the direction of their country.

*Generally speaking, do you think things in Afghanistan today are going in the right direction, or do you think they are going in the wrong direction? (Q-9) COMPARISON BETWEEN 2006, 2007, 2008 AND 2009*

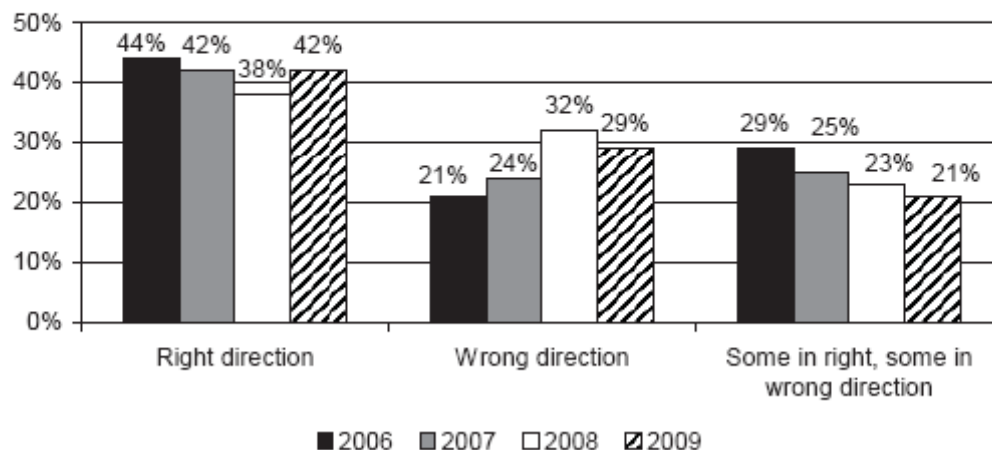


Table 4. Direction Afghanistan is heading  
(From Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People)<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Rennie et al., “Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People,” 16.

The percentage of the country that thinks Afghanistan is headed in the right direction has remained relatively consistent over the four years the survey was taken. Although the percentage rose between 200 and 2009 it remains comparatively similar to past years. The percentage of those who say the country is heading in the wrong direction however has risen during the four years the poll has been taken. The recent downturn in respondents who feel the country is heading in the wrong direction is positive but may be a too soon to draw any substantive conclusions from until a new poll is taken to see if the numbers increase or decrease.

A better way to understand the percentage of the population who feels the country is heading in the wrong direction is to look at the data concerning *why* they think the country is heading in the wrong direction. Table 5 depicts this information.

*Why do you say that things are moving in the wrong direction? (Q-11a&b combined, Base 1885)*

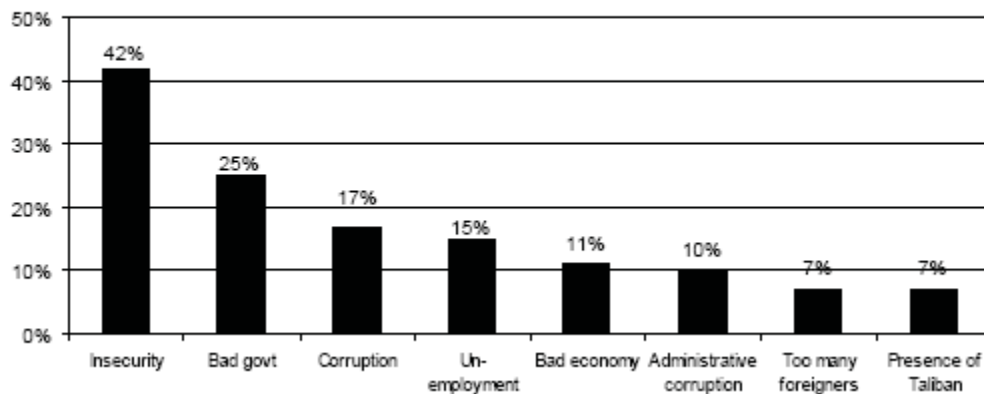


Table 5. Reason the country is heading in the wrong direction  
(From Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People)<sup>41</sup>

Insecurity is the top reason given by the Afghan population for why they think the country is heading in the wrong direction. The Taliban play a great role in why that is the top reason. The Taliban conduct activities that give the impression that the government

<sup>41</sup> Rennie et al., "Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People," 18.

cannot provide security, while at the same time convey to the people through their messaging that the government cannot provide security. The population's perception of security is currently almost completely controlled by the Taliban. The Taliban cause insecurity then highlight that insecurity throughout the country. By conducting operations that demonstrate the inability of the Afghan government to protect the people and then capturing video of events showing their claims, the Taliban may be effectively changing people's views of the direction Afghanistan is heading.

The next reason provided for why the country is headed in the wrong direction is bad government. Bad government includes inability to provide for the people and effectively manage resources. Those who see little in terms of reconstruction occurring in their area may think this is due to the inability of the government to properly manage reconstruction projects. There is a possibility that the Taliban could use this bad government sentiment to explain that a government guided by sharia would not allow this to happen. Although the Taliban do not have the direct capability to continue to exacerbate this sentiment the way they do insecurity, there remains an opening for them to try and capitalize on this perception through messaging. The third reason provided for why the country is headed in the wrong direction is corruption. The Taliban have been able to use this theme when they rose to power and as they highlight the theme again they can elevate the feelings of discontent among the people against the government.

The reason with the lowest percentage (7%) for why the country is heading in the wrong direction is the presence of the Taliban. Does the Afghan population not see the Taliban as a long-term threat and therefore not a significant reason to think the country is heading the wrong way? The people may see the Taliban as a presence that exists only until the other reasons are addressed, such as bad government and corruption. Without the presence of those two reasons the Taliban would have fewer grievances to highlight and draw support from the people for their cause. If this happened, the Taliban's support may dry up and the people may think the Taliban would just go away. The other reasons must be addressed but the main components that make up the Taliban information strategy would be removed.

### **C. TALIBAN EFFECTIVENESS OF TURNING THE POPULATION AGAINST U.S. AND AFGHAN FORCES**

The Taliban's most successful theme in their information strategy is their contention that the government and U.S. forces are unable to provide security. This is evident by the high percentage of those who believe the country is heading in the wrong direction. As stated earlier, the Taliban currently have the most direct influence over this perception. The ability of the Taliban to operate and intermingle among the Pashtun areas of both Afghanistan and Pakistan provide them a freedom of movement that enables them to hide from security forces. This ability allows them to continue their violent, intimidating, and illegal activities, thus perpetuating the notion that the Afghan security forces or U.S. forces cannot provide security. According to the Asia Foundation "The majority of respondents have a positive perception of the security situation in their local area in the North West (86%), Central/Kabul (78%), Central/Hazarajat (77%), North East (76%) and East (70%). On the other hand, more than half of respondents say that security in their local area is quite bad or very bad in the West (55%), South East (62%), and South West (65%) regions."<sup>42</sup> The areas with the highest perception of a poor security situation are the areas where the Taliban are operating.

The BBC conducted a poll in 2009 querying the Afghan population on specific issues relating to the presence of NATO forces. Their poll (Table 6) shows that support to U.S. and ISAF forces are on a downward trend, while opposition to those same forces has been increasing since 2006.

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<sup>42</sup> Rennie et al., "Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People," 15.

**Q18.** *Do you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose the presence of the following groups in Afghanistan today?*

U.S. military forces

	<b>2009</b>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2006</i>
	%	%	%
Strongly support	12	20	30
Somewhat support	51	51	48
Somewhat oppose	21	15	15
Strongly oppose	15	12	6
No opinion	2	2	1

NATO/ISAF military forces

	<b>2009</b>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2006</i>
	%	%	%
Strongly support	13	25	30
Somewhat support	46	42	48
Somewhat oppose	24	17	15
Strongly oppose	16	13	6
No opinion	2	2	1

Table 6. Support of Coalition forces by the Afghan people  
(From Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People)<sup>43</sup>

The trend appears to correspond to the timeframe of when the Taliban were increasing their activity level thus giving rise to their claim that the U.S. and Afghan security forces could not provide security to the people. The Asia Foundation polled the population on their level of fear in participating in various activities such as approaching the police, participating in peaceful demonstrations or travelling throughout the country. Almost half in each region polled feared approaching a member of the Afghan National Police (ANP). The areas citing the most fear again come from the areas that Taliban mostly operate. See Table 7.

<sup>43</sup> Anon, "2009 BBC Afghanistan Poll," *BBC*: 10, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/05\\_02\\_09afghan\\_poll\\_2009.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/05_02_09afghan_poll_2009.pdf) (accessed October 30, 2009).

*Table 3.6: Public's level of fear (combination of some fear and a lot of fear) to participate in various activities (Q-30a-f, Base 6406) BY REGION*

	Central/ Kabul (%)	South East (%)	East (%)	North East (%)	North West (%)	West (%)	South West (%)	Central/ Hazarajat (%)
a) Participating in resolving problems in your community	32	44	44	34	22	54	62	30
b) Voting in a national election	40	68	56	46	31	61	79	30
c) Participating in a peaceful demonstration	53	61	68	56	54	73	75	53
d) Running for public office	51	65	58	54	46	70	79	41
e) Encountering ANP officers	45	50	41	49	41	57	73	35
f) Traveling from one part of Afghanistan to another part of the country	67	71	62	65	56	87	78	59

Table 7. Public's level of fear  
(From Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People)<sup>44</sup>

These numbers indicate that the Taliban's messages are effectively influencing the view of the population in the regions where U.S. and Afghan security forces are based. The population's acceptance of the U.S. presence is also on a downward trend according to the BBC poll in Table 8.

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<sup>44</sup> Rennie et al., "Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People," 38.

**Q27. When do you think such forces\* should withdraw from Afghanistan?**

	<b>2009</b>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2005</i>
	%	%	%	%
Leave now	21	14	13	8
within 6-12 months	16	13	10	6
Within 1-2 years	14	18	13	12
Only after security restored	42	42	55	65
Remain permanently	3	7	5	4
No opinion	4	6	3	5

\* U.S. military forces (2005-7)

Table 8. When should U.S. forces withdraw from Afghanistan  
(From 2009 BBC Afghanistan Poll)<sup>45</sup>

The population appears to be losing trust in the U.S. as the upward trend of those who believe the U.S. should leave between now and within the next 12 months as well as a downward trend in those who think the U.S. shouldn't leave until security is restored. These trends work in the Taliban's favor for pursuing an information strategy that underscores the perception that the U.S. forces are another foreign occupying power that needs to be driven from Afghanistan.

**D. DOES THE POPULATION SUPPORT THE TALIBAN'S AIMS?**

A key question that needs to be addressed is whether or not the Afghan people are supporting the Taliban aims. The people of Afghanistan do appear, based on the Asia Foundation polling data, to consider their country heading in the wrong direction. The top three reasons for this belief correspond to the themes of the Taliban information strategy. Do the Taliban then have the support of the people, if their themes match the concerns of the people?

Polling data does indicate that the population believes the Taliban are growing stronger. Table 9 below seems to give credence to David Killcullen's description of the

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<sup>45</sup> Anon, "2009 BBC Afghanistan Poll," 13.

Taliban in an interview he gave for the *New Yorker*. “They’re essentially armed propaganda organizations,” Kilcullen said. “They switch between guerrilla activity and terrorist activity as they need to, in order to maintain the political momentum, and it’s all about an information operation that generates the perception of an unstoppable, growing insurgency.”<sup>46</sup> The Taliban are able to capitalize on the growing perceptions that they have created within the population, which gives the impression that they are on the rise. This perception is most accepted in the areas where the Taliban are operating.

**Q20.** *Over the past 12 months, would you say the Taliban in Afghanistan have grown stronger, grown weaker, or remained about the same?*

	<b>2009</b>	<i>2007</i>
	%	%
Grown stronger	43	42
Grown weaker	24	24
Remained about same	25	26
No opinion	8	8

Table 9. Perception of the Taliban strength  
(From Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People)<sup>47</sup>

There may be a perception that the Taliban are getting stronger, however that may not indicate that the Taliban have gained any more support for their group. Two questions posed by the BBC poll indicate that the Taliban have done nothing to demonstrate to the Afghan people that they should be given support. In fact it appears the opposite has occurred. The Afghan people as indicated in earlier polls may be showing less support for U.S. forces but according to Table 10, the Taliban have also appeared to the population as posing a greater threat to their security.

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<sup>46</sup> George Packer, “Knowing the Enemy: Can Social Scientists Redefine the ‘War on Terror’?” *The New Yorker*, December 11, 2006: 4, <http://quixotism.files.wordpress.com/2007/03/the-new-yorker-knowing-the-enemy.pdf> (accessed June 14, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> Anon, “2009 BBC Afghanistan Poll,” 11.

**Q11.** *Which of the following do you think poses the biggest danger in our country?*

	<b>2009</b>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2005</i>
	%	%	%	%
Taliban	58	52	57	41
Drug traffickers	13	23	20	28
Local commanders	7	9	9	22
United States	8	10	8	4
Current Afghan government	1	1	3	2
Something else	10	2	0	2
No opinion	3	2	0	2

Table 10. Biggest danger to Afghanistan (From 2009 BBC Afghanistan Poll)<sup>48</sup>

Even though the trend may be upward in the belief that U.S. forces should leave, Table 10 suggests that over the last three years the percentage of the population that sees the U.S. as posing the biggest threat is steady. In contrast the Taliban are viewed by a greater portion of the population as the largest threat to their country. The Taliban may be successful in their information strategy to paint the U.S. as another occupying force that needs to be removed from Afghanistan, but it has not translated into the U.S. being viewed as a great threat requiring an uprising to throw the U.S. forces out.

When asked the question if the Taliban have become more moderate in their views, a quarter of the respondents believed they had.

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<sup>48</sup> Anon, "2009 BBC Afghanistan Poll," 8.

**Q24.** *Is it your impression that the Taliban have changed and become more moderate, or do you think they remain the same as they were when they ruled Afghanistan before?*

	<b>2009</b>
	%
The Taliban are more moderate now	24
The Taliban are the same as before	64
No opinion	12

Table 11. Impression of whether or not the Taliban have changed  
(From 2009 BBC Afghanistan Poll)<sup>49</sup>

This view could mean that Taliban's efforts to embrace new technological methods, they once forbade, and their need to recruit new fighters has been successful in changing people's perceptions of them as a group. The next poll indicates that although the perceptions of the groups have changed people still do not wish to see them come back into power.

**Q10.** *Who would you rather have ruling Afghanistan today?*

	<b>2009</b>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2005</i>
	%	%	%	%
Current government	82	84	88	91
Taliban	4	4	3	1
Other	10	6	4	2
No opinion	4	6	5	6

Table 12. Who would the population prefer rule Afghanistan  
(From 2009 BBC Afghanistan Poll)<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Anon, "2009 BBC Afghanistan Poll," 12.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 8.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

The Taliban's information strategy appears effective in influencing the population along its main themes. Support for U.S. forces and Afghan government has dwindled, but the Taliban have not been successful in convincing the population that they offer a better alternative. The Taliban's reach is severely restricted in the country's most abundant information source, the radio. It also has limited or no ability to broadcast a message by television. As cell phones and computers are becoming more commonplace, the Taliban have initiated methods and devised tactics to use these devices to more effectively communicate their messages.

The population of Afghanistan is increasingly feeling their country is headed in the wrong direction, mostly due to their sense of insecurity. The Taliban efforts to increase attacks and then distribute video footage of those attacks as well as more interviews with Taliban leaders is contributing to this overall perception of the country heading in the wrong direction. These same methods are used to exacerbate the feeling that U.S. and Afghan security forces are unable to provide security. These factors have most likely had the effect of the population increasingly opposing the presence of U.S. forces and fearing Afghan Police forces.

Despite the Taliban efforts to convince the people to support the withdrawal of U.S. forces and delegitimize the Afghan government, the people do not seem convinced that these forces are the biggest threat. The Taliban continue to be unable to convince the people that if they were to return to power things would be better than the last time they ruled. While the Taliban themes may resonate with the Afghan people, the people still seem to be willing to tolerate a foreign presence and give the central government a chance to succeed. More importantly the people seem to overwhelmingly view the Taliban as the major threat and do not wish to see their return to power.

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## IV. RECOMMENDATIONS/CONCLUSION

### A. RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter contains recommendations based on the content addressed in the previous chapters. In addressing the Taliban information strategy, recommendations are culled from observations and discussions written by individuals who have experience or a voice in policy or information operations. In addition to these individuals mentioned, reports from journalists on their experiences in Afghanistan as well as organizations conducting studies of Afghanistan will be considered.

The recommendations included in this chapter offer possible options for the information environment and do not attempt to recommend policy changes. As policies do change, so too will the need to adjust the information strategy to support those changes. The information strategy recommendations offered here suggest ways to deal with the policies that already exist and the tactics and operations the Taliban are using to their advantage. The 2009 ISAF Commander's initial assessment report talks about the need to more aggressively confront the Taliban information strategy.

IA more forceful and offensive StratCom [Strategic Communications] approach must be devised whereby INS [insurgents] are exposed continually for their cultural and religious violations, anti-Islamic and indiscriminate use of violence and terror, and by concentrating on their vulnerabilities. These include their causing of the majority of civilian casualties, attacks on education, development projects, and government institutions, and flagrant contravention of the principles of the Koran.<sup>51</sup>

The U.S. must understand the limits with which they will have to contend. Such limits include the lack of modern infrastructure in Afghanistan. The lack of infrastructure hinders the ability of the U.S. and the Afghan government to counter the Taliban's message in the rural areas and is not likely to improve in the near future. If security

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<sup>51</sup> Stanley McChrystal, "COMISAF'S Initial Assessment," *Headquarters International Security Assistance Force*, August 30, 2009: D-4, [http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment\\_Redacted\\_092109.pdf?sid=ST2009092003140](http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf?sid=ST2009092003140) (accessed November 14, 2009).

forces do not maintain a permanent presence in certain areas, then government or U.S. provided radios for the people may result in death if they are caught with one in their home by members of the Taliban. Perhaps the best way to reach these areas is through word of mouth. Word of mouth, however, will only be effective if the words match the deeds.

To deal with the Taliban information strategy, one should look at three options. Those options are first to counter what the Taliban are saying. This is effective if the Taliban are lying, however not everything they say is a lie. At the least it may not be perceived as a lie to their target audience. The second option is to ignore what the Taliban are saying. This is best used if the Taliban seem to be attempting to cause a reaction to their claims that would give them credibility. The third option is to amplify what the Taliban say. The Taliban need support from the population in order to persist. As polling data has shown, the Taliban are not viewed favorably by the population, thus they say things to gain support but may not actually do what they say. Amplifying what they say for the purpose of demonstrating their hypocrisy can be an effective way to eliminate support for them.

### **1. Countering the Taliban Message**

The Taliban understand the information environment in which they operate. They know that due to the lack of alternative information sources available to the population they can exaggerate claims they make on their actions. Foxley points this out in his work.

False or inaccurate claims can work in the Taliban's favour. A large part of the local Afghan and Pakistani audiences that they are communicating to, particularly those in the Pashtun tribal belt on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border, are either poorly educated, sympathetic to the Taliban or have limited access to public information sources, preventing confirmation of the claims made. Much of this audience is prepared to give credence to Taliban claims more or less regardless of their plausibility.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Foxley, "The Taliban's Propaganda Activities: How Well is the Afghan Insurgency Communicating and What Is It Saying?" 6.

Embellishing claims is not a misunderstanding of the facts, but rather a deliberate effort by the Taliban to be the first to get the story out. The Taliban realize that with few media present in the regions they operate, there is little ability to cross check the “facts” that the Taliban provide. News media outlets receive information about an event and report it, no matter who the source. The International Crisis Group’s Asia Report states that

...the information minister under the Taliban regime, Quadratullah Jamal, boasted of a proactive approach: The most prominent Afghan specialists admit in their interviews that the Taliban media activities are very quick and reactive when journalists ask us for information. The Karzai media ... are much weaker and cannot compete with us. Journalists confirm that when they ask the ministry of defence to give information about a particular event, it takes 24 hours to get the answer, while we can give the information through satellite phones in a record time.<sup>53</sup>

Fact checking is not a priority for the Taliban.

The statement by Jamal is confirmed by Lieutenant Colonel Shawn Stroud, Director of Strategic Communication at the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center. He is quoted in an article by the Council of Foreign Relations as saying

U.S. field commanders need the tools to combat counterproductive messaging quickly, like speaking directly to the news media or even filming operations and posting their own combat footage online before the Taliban can. "It's almost like we've surrendered the information battlefield and said, 'Well, we don't play by the same rules as them because we have to tell the truth,' " Stroud says. "The key is, we've got to be first with the truth. So we've got to build systems that do that."<sup>54</sup>

The confirmation by U.S. personnel that the Taliban are more effective at getting their message out should give reason for concern. The Taliban are putting forth falsehoods and the media are reporting it as firsthand accounts. The problem with this is not so much that they report what they are given. The real problem lies with the inability for the

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<sup>53</sup> Anon, “Asia Report: Taliban Propaganda—Winning the War of Words?” 9.

<sup>54</sup> Greg Bruno, “Winning the Information War in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 11, 2009, [http://www.cfr.org/publication/19330/winning\\_the\\_information\\_war\\_in\\_afghanistan\\_and\\_pakistan.html?breadcrumb=%2F](http://www.cfr.org/publication/19330/winning_the_information_war_in_afghanistan_and_pakistan.html?breadcrumb=%2F) (accessed June 15, 2009).

media to properly check the facts they are given by Taliban sources and that coalition forces are slow to respond to those false or unconfirmed reports. By the time the U.S. forces or Afghan government have all the facts, the story has moved on and is does not get reported. This leaves the audience to believe what was reported but not countered.

One of the key components of the Taliban information strategy is their claim to establishing law throughout Afghanistan based on sharia. The overall idea of sharia based law may seem ideal to a certain percentage of the population, however the Taliban conduct activities that can be used to discredit them and counter that claim. The Taliban have in the past killed Muslim clerics who spoke out against the Taliban's religious authority and their un-Islamic activities.

Efforts should be taken to find Afghan clerics who are willing to speak out against the Taliban and offer a counter-narrative to what the Taliban are saying. The Kandahar Ulema-u-Shura consists of 15 member clerics who have come out against the Taliban. This Shura edict concerning the Taliban stated:

They are saying that foreign troops have captured our country and they are calling to start a jihad against them. Just by using the name of jihad, they are killing as many people as they want. Respected Muslim brothers, you know the situation: you are witnesses that the president of our country is a Muslim, and his vice presidents and all members of the cabinet and government authorities are Muslims," the edict reads. "No one has said you should stop going to the mosque or stop praying, so for what reason is this a place of fighting?"<sup>55</sup>

When religious authorities in Afghanistan speak out against the Taliban, their edicts need to be disseminated through whatever the appropriate means would be to a specific target audience. The people need to hear opposing views and engage in discussions about the validity of the Taliban's claims to religious authority. This counter-narrative can also be exploited to bring to light the Taliban's unwillingness to recognize any religious interpretations other than their own.

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<sup>55</sup> Carlotta Gall, "Taliban Try to Frighten Afghan Voters in Rural Areas," *New York Times*, February 19, 2004: 1, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/19/world/taliban-try-to-frighten-afghan-voters-in-rural-areas.html?scp=1&sq=Taliban%20try%20to%20frighten%20afghan%20voters%20in%20rural%20areas&st=cse> (accessed October 22, 2009).

Countering the Taliban narrative requires more than just disseminating facts to disprove Taliban claims. As stated before, the information environment that exists in Afghanistan gives advantage to the side that gets its message out first, whether truthful or not. The U.S. and Afghan government cannot wait to be reactive to Taliban claims. It is necessary to be properly positioned to disseminate information out as soon as possible in order to take away the Taliban information domain advantage. Information dissemination must occur at the lowest level possible in Afghanistan. Due to the reliance on word of mouth and exchange of information through personal contacts, the lowest level unit on the ground in direct contact with the population is how information can be transmitted most effectively. Those in daily contact with the population will be able to not only disseminate information but they will also be able to gather information about groups like the Kandahar Ulema-a-Shura and attempt to persuade the people to listen to their statements.

Another option to countering the Taliban information strategy is to address their claims of establishing stability where they rule. Afghans have already experienced life under the Taliban and that experience should be taken advantage of and exploited. The Taliban's local leadership needs to be challenged at every opportunity to explain their plans for the future. This approach can be especially effective in areas where only coalition forces are located. Tribal leaders could invite the Taliban to a meeting to discuss what they would offer in terms of development and policy issues compared to what the coalition is offering, and where Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are located are already providing. This approach will help the tribal elders explain to their people, who really are the better option for their future well being.

## **2. Ignore Taliban Statements**

The Taliban often make outrageous claims about their success in battles and the casualties they have inflicted. It is easy to offer a counter narrative because the counter narrative can be supported by facts or eyewitness accounts. The Taliban makes claims that are much harder to counter and in certain cases those claims may be correct. An example of such claims concern corruption in the government. Corruption exists in

the Afghan government, and efforts must be taken to correct the situation. but it will take time to be corrected. The Taliban use government corruption as a main point in their information strategy to turn the population away from supporting the government. It is important to realize the situation exists. Ignoring the Taliban statements of corruption is useful in reducing their ability to use the counter narrative against the government or claim the U.S. is supporting a corrupt government.

The problems of corruption within the government must be dealt with, and the people must see visible signs that corruption is being eradicated. The information strategist must not attempt to discredit Taliban claims on corruption until the population perceives a significant decrease in government corruption. Methods such as highlighting new projects and Afghan security forces performing well may assist in helping reduce the perception of corruption without trying to directly counter any Taliban claims of corruption. The people need to see their government providing for them and improving their situation; this will do more for changing perceptions then attempting to convince the population through messaging that the government is combating corruption.

### **3. Amplifying the Taliban Message**

Amplifying what the Taliban are saying may appear to be counter intuitive to discrediting the Taliban information strategy. The Taliban have taken actions to demonstrate that they act in a manner consistent with Muslim teachings. Their actions, however, may suggest otherwise. A recent example of the Taliban trying to improve their reputation has been the issuance of a Code of Conduct. This Code of Conduct was issued to guide all Taliban members in their actions in the conduct of operations. The Code covers topics such as how to treat prisoners and enemy collaborators, how internal mujahedeen issues will be handles, and how the Taliban establish governing bodies. The Code of Conduct is a way to demonstrate to the population that the Taliban are to “good guys.”

Amplifying what the Taliban include in the Code of Conduct is a way to let the population see the difference between what the Taliban say and what they do. A U.S. military spokesman in Afghanistan described the code of conduct during a CNN interview this way.

Lt. Cmdr. Christine Sidenstricker said it was notable that the document is intended to be "prescriptive on how the bad guys are supposed to conduct themselves." "Their day to day actions contradict everything in it," Sidenstricker said. "The long and the short of it is, they don't operate in accordance to their code of conduct."

She said more than 60 percent of civilians killed have been killed by the Taliban, and since January, more than 450 innocent Afghans have been killed and more than 1,000 others have been injured. Also, half the casualties resulting from roadside bombs were civilians.

"The booklet also says suicide attacks should always be done against high-ranking officials. In reality, they have killed more than 200 Afghan civilians."<sup>56</sup>

The Code of Conduct is one example of how it could be useful to amplify what the Taliban are saying. The benefit of amplifying their Code of Conduct is that their words do not match their actions. The more people who are exposed to this document and what the Taliban are saying the more the people can use the Taliban's words against them. It may be more difficult to recruit new members if those who may be willing to join find the Taliban hypocritical in their words and deeds thus decide not to join the Taliban.

The Taliban offer other areas where their messages may not be in line with their actions. The Taliban's support of Opium harvesting and production is an area that may be appropriate for amplification. In 2001, the Taliban reduced opium harvests because heroin production was un-Islamic. Now, however the Taliban benefit from the opium harvest financially to support their efforts. The Taliban have made statements that they

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<sup>56</sup> Anon, "New Taliban Rule Book Calls for Fewer Suicide Attacks," *CNN.com*, July 30 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/07/30/taliban.code.conduct/index.html> (accessed November 15, 2009).

do not have any role in poppy production. These claims can be very useful in areas where the population sees their involvement and can refute these claims. By amplifying the Taliban's message, they in essence would be doing the work for the Afghan government and U.S. forces by providing the messaging material that could then be used against them.

## **B. CONCLUSION**

Despite the current belief of a resurgent Taliban, they are no more capable of defeating U.S. and coalition forces militarily today than they were eight years ago. The reasons for the support they receive must be understood and countered with an effective long term coordinated information strategy. The Taliban offer nothing more than a return to the way they ran Afghanistan before they were toppled and therefore nothing to improve the lives of the Afghan people. They have a successful short term strategy based on fear, ignorance and a lack of an effective U.S. counter-narrative. Although it will not be easy or quick, the U.S. and Afghan governments must jointly develop and execute an information strategy highlighting the benefits of the future and addressing the perceptions of all the Afghan people.

The Taliban have demonstrated their willingness to adopt new technological tools for disseminating their messages when they have proven their effectiveness. By embracing new messaging tools the Taliban are able to show the people they are a group willing to change. They may have succeeded in convincing the people that they are a group that can change. This is important because the people already have a perception and understanding of what life under Taliban rule is like and any way the Taliban can alter that perception works in their favor.

The key themes the Taliban focus on contribute to their inability to garner more favorable support. Their current disadvantage is that they concentrate on the same themes that brought them to power the first time. The situation has altered and unless the Taliban can demonstrate that they have changed from the first time they held power, it is unlikely they will gather the necessary support to return to power. The Afghan people's desire to have peace and security, or a government guided by Islamic teaching and free of

corruption, which the Taliban capitalized on in their rise to power, has not changed. What has changed is the people have experience with what Taliban rule means.

Changing the delivery mechanisms for conveying their themes, clearly demonstrate that the Taliban have not fully grasped the understanding that they need to change the cultural framing of their themes. By relying on the same cultural frames, the Taliban do not appear to have internalized why the population turned on them so quickly when U.S. forces went into Afghanistan and why even after eight years of war they are still willing to give the Karzai government a chance to work.

The Taliban appear to have a information strategy based on short term objectives. Those objectives appear to be; hold out long enough until the U.S. forces leave, continue to highlight the fact that the current government is weak and corrupt, and sow fear by emphasizing that their presence will continue even after U.S. forces leave. If the Taliban took a longer view, they would change the way they present themselves and their efforts. Currently they present themselves in a manner which suggests that they have more staying power than the U.S. and therefore the people will have to deal with them sooner or later, rather than offering a plan for how they could make the people's lives better. This does not endear them to the population, which is why they have been unable to generate much support.

Returning to SMT and cultural framing literature, McAdams point out that "Framing contests occur in face-to-face interaction and through a variety of media - newspapers, books, pamphlets, radio, television. Movement activists ... have to change and mobilize bystander publics, many of whom may only know of the movement and its issues as portrayed in various media."<sup>57</sup> With this in mind, the Taliban information strategy has been unable or unwilling to change the people's perceptions of them. While the Taliban have been effectively denied radio and television outlets to disseminate their message, their most effective tool, the night letter, has mostly done nothing more than produce fear of the Taliban rather than generate long lasting support. Even the acceptance of new technologies, such as web postings and videos on DVD appear to only

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<sup>57</sup> McAdam et al., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, 270.

be effective in drawing in recruits already sympathetic to their ideology and boosting oral among its members. There is little to no evidence that the Taliban information strategy is causing people to support their ideology. They may be contributing to the growing dissatisfaction the people are showing towards their current government and the presence of U.S. forces but that dissatisfaction does not appear to be translate into acceptance of a return to power of the Taliban.

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